DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 597 CS 507 875

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TITLE Teaching about Culture and Communicative Life in India.
PUB DATE Feb 92
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Western States Communication Association (63rd, Boise, ID, February 21-25, 1992).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Background; *Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; *Cultural Influences; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Patterns; Hinduism; *India

ABSTRACT

Basic patterns of culture and communication in India such as world view, reincarnation, concepts of Karma and Dharma, stages of life, the caste system, time orientation, collectivism, hierarchical orientation, language situation, and nonverbal communication norms are an integral part of Hinduism and Indian culture, and have a significant influence on the personality, values, beliefs, and attitudes of Hindus in India and abroad. In planning culture-specific instruction, it would be efficacious to choose the method and technique that best suits the type of course, instructional purpose, content, and context involved. Three effective instructional techniques for teaching Indian culture and communication patterns are: personal intercultural experiences, a cultural awareness exercise, and cultural assimilators. (PRA)

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TEACHING ABOUT CULTURE AND COMMUNICATIVE LIFE IN INDIA

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Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of
Western States Communication Association
Boise, Idaho, February 21-25, 1992

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TEACHING ABOUT CULTURE AND COMMUNICATIVE LIFE IN INDIA

Nemi C. Jain

The purpose of this paper is (1) to discuss some basic patterns of culture and communication in India, and (2) to offer a few guidelines for teaching Indian culture and communication patterns at the college level.

Culture and Communicative Life in India

1. Indian culture has a continuous history that extends over 5,000 years. Very early, India evolved a distinctive culture and religion, Hinduism, which was modified and adjusted as it came into contact with outside elements. Hinduism is an amorphous body of beliefs, philosophies, worship practices, and codes of conduct. It is a religion as well as a way of life. It is the uniting force underlying the Indian culture. Hinduism is followed by about 80% of India's population of over 850 million. This paper deals primarily with Hindu culture and communicative life in India.

2. Indian world view is very complex. India's sages and philosophers for the last several thousand years have sought to understand the deepest level of reality and to satisfy the deep human longing for spiritual fulfilment. They sought a link between the dynamic energy of reality in its deepest levels and the grounds of human existence. This quest generated the basic Indian wisdom that the fundamental energizing power of the cosmos and the spiritual energy of human beings are one and the same. At the deepest levels of our existence, we share in the very energies and powers that create and structure the universe itself. Because of our participation in the ultimate energy and power of reality, it is possible to transform our superficial, suffering, and limited existence into a free and boundless one in which life is experienced at its deepest and most profound level. This spiritual transformation has constituted the ultimate aim in life for most of the Indian people over the ages(Jain, 1991).

3. Indian gods and goddesses are usually viewed as symbols of the ultimate reality rather than the ultimate reality itself. The ultimate level of reality is undivided; it has no form and no name. No number of symbols can exhaust the fullness of the ultimate, so there is no limit to the number of gods. This is why a Hindu can say in the same breath that there are millions of gods, only one god, and no gods, for the last two statements mean, respectively, that all gods symbolize the one ultimate reality and that this reality cannot be captured entirely by a symbol.

4. Reincarnation: The Hindu belief in reincarnation affirms that individual souls enter the world and pass through a sequence of bodies or life cycles. On the subhuman level, the passage is through a series of increasingly complex bodies until at last a human one is attained. Up to this point, the soul's growth is virtually automatic. With the soul's graduation into a human body, this automatic, escalator mode of ascent comes to an end. The soul's assignment to this exalted habitation is evidence that it has reached self-consciousness, and with this state comes freedom, responsibility, and effort. Now the individual soul, as a human being, is fully responsible for its behavior through the doctrine of Karma--the moral law of cause and effect. The present condition of each individual life is a product of what one did in the previous life; and one's present acts, thoughts, and decisions determine one's future states.

5. This concept of karma and the completely moral universe it implies carries two important psychological corollaries. First, it commits the Hindu who understands it to complete personal responsibility. Each individual is wholly responsible for his or her present condition and will have exactly the future he or she is now creating. Conversely, the idea of a moral universe closes the door to all appeals to chance or accident. In this world there is no chance or accident. Karma decrees that every decision must have its determinate consequences, but the decisions themselves are, in the last analysis, freely arrived at. This means that the general conditions of life--rank, station, position--are predetermined by one's past karma. However, individual humans as carriers of a soul are free throughout their life span to make choices and to determine actions independent of the soul.

6. According to Hinduism, the aim of life is to free oneself progressively from the exclusive identification with the lower levels of the self (i.e., materialism) in order to realize the most profound level of existence. Since at this deepest level the self is identical with ultimate reality--the Brahman, once this identity has been realized there is nothing that can defeat or destroy the self. Thus, the soul puts an end to the process of reincarnation and merges with the Brahman, from whence it originated in the first place. This state for an individual soul is called moksha or nirvana (Jain, 1991).

7. Dharma: The concept of dharma is another unique feature of Hinduism and Indian culture. It refers to a code of conduct that guides the life of a person both as an individual and as a member of society. It is the law of right living, the observance of which secures the double objectives of happiness on earth and salvation. The life of a Hindu is regulated in

a very detailed manner by the laws of dharma. Personal habits, social and family ties, fasts and feasts, religious rituals, obligations of justice and morality, and even rules of personal hygiene and food preparation are all conditioned by it.

8. Stages of Life: The concept of dharma at the individual level recognizes four stages in each person's life: (i) brahmacharya or student age--at this stage, the obligations of temperance, sobriety, chastity, and social service are firmly established in the minds of the young; (ii) grahastha or householder stage--at this stage, beginning with marriage, one normally undertakes the obligations of family life, becoming a member of a social body and accepting its rights and obligations; (iii) vanaprashtha or retirement stage--at this stage, the individual is required to control his or her attachment to worldly possessions and is supposed to cultivate a spirit of renunciation; (iv) sannyasa or renunciation stage--at this stage of complete renunciation of worldly objects and desires, a person is a disinterested servant of humanity who finds peace in the strength of spirit; at this final stage of life, one attempts to fulfill the ultimate aim of human life, moksha or liberation.

9. The Caste System: The caste system began in India about 3,000 years ago as a straightforward, functional division of Indian society. It was later misinterpreted by priests as permanent and immutable as the word of God. According to the caste system, the Hindu segment of Indian society is divided into four castes, hierarchically, from higher to lower:

(i) Brahmins--seers or priests who perform such duties as teaching, preaching, assisting in the sacrificial processes, giving alms, and receiving gifts.

(ii) Kashtryas--administrators and rulers responsible for protecting life and treasures;

(iii) Vaisyas--traders, businesspeople, farmers, and herders;

(iv) Sudras--artisans such as carpenters, blacksmiths, and laborers.

In the course of time, a fifth group developed that was ranked so low as to be considered outside and beneath the caste system itself. The members of this fifth "casteless" group are variously referred to as "untouchables," "outcastes," "scheduled castes," or (by Mahatma Gandhi) Harijans--children of God. People in this group inherit the kinds of work that in India are considered least desirable, such as scavenging, slaughtering animals, leather tanning, and sweeping the streets (Chopra, 1977).

The role of caste system in India can be further understood when it is associated with dharma, discussed earlier. Each caste has its own dharma or code of conduct or duty. Normally each caste is endogamous and there are many kinds of restrictions between castes. A person is a member of a caste because the person is born in it. The ideas of good and bad or personal purity are defined in relation to caste responsibilities and intercaste relations. Together the caste system and dharma established a well defined but stratified social order for Hindu society. The merit of the system lay in its contribution to social stability and social security. Everyone had a known role to play and a group with whom to feel reasonably secure. The lower castes and outcastes are not necessarily happy with their role in the system, however, as evidenced by the numbers which converted to other religions, especially Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity--all of which allowed them to escape from caste restrictions(Terpstra, 1978).

The implications of the caste system for the economy and business are quite obvious, and quite negative. To the degree that caste system is rigidly followed in the economy, it is difficult to allocate human resources efficiently. If birth and caste determine work assignments, rather than ability and performance, the output of the economy suffers. Coordination and integration of the work force and management can also be hindered by caste restrictions. Occupational caste assignments derived centuries ago in an agrarian society are not likely to mesh with today's technological, urban, industrial society.

Of course, the negative implications of the caste system for the economy are valid only to the degree that caste restrictions actually operate. The Indian Constitution has a provision outlawing discrimination based on caste. However, as any American knows, legislation is not always effective in bringing about immediate changes in social behavior. Sudden changes will not occur rapidly in India either, especially with a behavior pattern sanctioned by religion and 3,000 years of tradition. Neverthless, political pressures, education, industrialization, and especially urbanization are all combining to erode away the traditional caste restrictions(Terpstra, 1978, pp.39-40).

Since India's independence in 1947, India has launched a massive social reform movement against "untouchability". There are numerous forms of affirmative action programs and "quota systems" aimed at promoting the welfare of untouchables and lower castes. These programs have produced many benefits for these disadvantaged groups in the fields of education, employment, politics, and government. Unfortunately, there is still considerable amount of prejudice and discrimination against untouchables, especially in rural areas which comprise approximately 75% of Indian population.

10. Time Orientation: Indians are proud of their cultural heritage and value past more than present or future. Because of Indian world view of the cyclic nature of the universe and the belief of reincarnation, Indians have a relaxed attitude towards time. This is changing in urban areas due to the impact of industrialization and westernization.

11. Collectivism: India is a relatively collectivistic culture in which family, caste, and the society is valued more than the individual. Social relations are valued highly. Task-orientation and materialism are relatively newer values being acquired by Indian people as a result of westernization.

12. Hierarchical Orientation: Indian social life is characterized by hierarchy in social life including men-women relationships, caste system, age groups, and formal organizations. India is a relatively patriarchal society.

13. Language: The official language is Hindi. English is the second official language. Most central government documents are in both languages. Government policy is to encourage wider use of Hindi. There are 14 other regional languages recognised for official use in regional areas or states.

14. Nonverbal Communication Norms: There is considerable variation in nonverbal communication norms among various caste groups and geographical regions. Generally speaking, public display of affection is viewed negatively. The left hand is considered dirty because of its use for toilet purposes. Touching the feet of the other person is considered a sign of respect for that person. Indians do not like to discuss business at dinner. Silence is highly valued.

Guidelines for Teaching Indian Culture and Communication Patterns

1. Purposes of Teaching: An instructor should have a clear statement of specific purposes for teaching a particular culture. In my teaching of intercultural communication courses, my purpose in teaching Indian culture is to increase their cultural awareness of world view, values, role structures, communicative norms, and disvalued cultural behaviors. Also, students should understand critical cultural differences and their influence on communication behavior. This increased awareness of culture-specific information and cultural differences would enhance the transfer of learning to new situations and enhance isomorphic attributions which facilitates intercultural communication.

2. Teaching Methods and Techniques: Damen (1987) has summarized numerous methods and techniques which have been developed and used successfully in culture training projects. Each has its strong and weak points. In planning your own culture-specific instruction, choose the method and technique that best suits the type of course, instructional purpose, content, and context involved. Do not forget that you should also consider your own teaching strengths, talents, and skills. An alphabetical list of culture-specific teaching methods and techniques suggested by Damen (1987) is given below:

2.1. Area-specific Studies
2.2. Case Studies
2.3. Contrast American
2.4. Critical Incidents
2.5. Culture Assimilators
2.6. Culture Capsules and Culture Clusters
2.7. Culture Discovery Techniques
2.8. Culture Quizzes
2.9. Culture Self-Awareness Techniques
2.10. Dialogues
2.11. Group Discussion
2.12. Informant Interviewing
2.13. Language and Culture Connections
2.14. Media Units
2.15. Problem-solving Practice
2.16. Readings
2.17. Simulation
2.18. Situational Exercises

For teaching Indian culture in my intercultural courses, I have used several of these instructional methods and techniques. Let me share briefly a few most effective techniques from my personal experience of teaching about Indian culture and communication patterns. Most of my techniques are adapted from the above list to suit my instructional situations. In many cases I develop my own instructional materials and continue to improve to suit my needs.

Personal Intercultural Experiences: Under this technique, I have used three variations. First, I will describe some of my own personal experiences or critical incidents when I came to the United States from India. Students will be asked to analyze the cultural factors underlying my experience. Second, I would ask any class members who have lived or travelled in India to describe their personal experiences followed by a cultural analysis of factors which may have contributed to the experiences. The third alternative approach for this exercise is to invite one or two foreign students from India to describe their observations and personal experiences in the United States. The class is asked to analyze cultural factors which can explain the nature of observations and intercultural problems.

Culture Awareness Exercise: This exercise combines several instructional techniques including readings, informant interviewing, culture-specific area study, and group discussions. A group of students is assigned the task of conducting culture-specific study from the literature with a view to identify 5-7 major cultural patterns such as cultural beliefs, values, attitudes and norms of Indian people. Then, they are to compare these cultural traits with their own cultural traits with a view to identify cultural similarities and differences. The students are asked to interview a few natives of India to gather further information on these cultural traits and cultural differences. Next, through group discussion and culture discovery technique, the group creates a set of dialogues and critical incidents to show how cultural traits and cultural differences affect intercultural communication between Americans and students from India. Students are encouraged to use media units, case studies, and role playing techniques for completing this exercise.

Groups benefit most when they create dialogues, case studies and role playing based upon their culture-specific study and group discussion. The whole class benefits from the class presentation of the group report and role playing.

Culture Assimilators: I have adapted a few cultural assimilators from Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie and Young (1986) to teach about culture and communication patterns in India. These are very effective for teaching how a specific cultural trait is related to some other aspects of the culture and how it affects communication in a particular context. I encourage my students to design a few cultural assimilators for specific cultural traits of India. This creative dimension of this exercise has been found to be very useful in learning about a foreign culture.

Summary

This paper has discussed some basic patterns of culture and communication in India: world view, reincarnation, concepts of Karma and Dharma, stages of life, the caste system, time orientation, collectivism, hierarchical orientation, language situation, and nonverbal communication norms. These patterns are integral part of Hinduism and Indian culture, and they have a significant influence on the personality, values, beliefs, and attitudes of Hindus in India and abroad. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of three effective instructional techniques from my personal experience in teaching Indian culture and communication patterns: personal intercultural experiences, cultural awareness exercise, and cultural assimilators.

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